LIBRARY OF HOPE
Romans 15:1-6
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In the future, historians might describe our culture by the covers of our news magazines. They preserve images of what we deem important and noteworthy. I was struck by a recent Newsweek cover because it looked so out of step with the times. It was the Bible printed to look like an illuminated manuscript. In the cover stories of current significance it was a throwback out of the past. There is a strange vitality about that ancient document that compels people to look at it in the present.

Ane while it continues to be newsworthy in the battles for its place in the school and in the laboratory and it's produced and translated and stolen in record numbers, many of us feel its strangeness more than its vitality.

Even the most skeptical has probably had a resolution to find out what all the fuss was about and to "read the bible". And after a book or two they become (as the preface to the Reader's Digest Condensed Version says) "confused and exhausted". I have confidence that this same scenario will occur in this new year, despite the fact that Congress had designated 1983 as the Year of the Bible. The Bible does have a strange vitality and we can tap that and make it our own.

One of the most powerful ways that the Bible can come alive for us whether we be skeptic or saint or a bit of both is through its stories. The Bible gives us stories to help us live life fully. Parents grieve because their children don't know who Moses was. English teachers are saddened by students who can't savor the richness of Moby Dick because the name Ishmael is foreign to them. Play-goers to the current Broadway musical "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" miss the continuity of the play because they are not familiar with the story. But it's more than just a literary classic which adds spice to our civilization. The stories of the Bible have the ability to shape our lives.

Psychologists, educators and theologians are recovering the power and impact of stories on our lives. Stories, myths, tales all seem to feel our deep need to understand and to make sense of things. Every family has favorite stories which get recounted every Christmas or family gathering about what it means to be a member of that family. Children learn not to cry "wolf" because of the story about the shepherd boy who did. Children are particularly enchanted with stories about their parents as children. Those stories help them see what life is and will be like.

Corporations and businesses have their own stories. Terrence Deal, author of the recent book, Corporate Cultures, ties the success of corporations with their own stories and heroes that in the telling pass on the dreams and visions of the company.

Nations too, are shaped by stories. America has had a particular love affair with the Bible. The Puritans, the immigrants, and every Presidential candidate have seen in the Biblical story the special destiny of our country. Settlers named cities after Biblical names, called our nation the "New Israel" and justified social and political actions because of that Book. Public

education was founded so that every citizen could read it. During his campaign President Reagan pointed to a Bible and said, "all the complex and horrendous questions concerning us at home and world wide are answered in that one book."

Newsweek reports that "historians are discovering that the Bible, perhaps even more than the Constitution, is our founding document." (12/27/82)

The way we construct reality, the basic beliefs we have about life are based on ideas and concepts we received which have been confirmed by our life experiences. By poems or tales, paintings, or songs or other people's lives we have heard or overheard stories which give our life orientation.

By the time children today reach the age of reason they have absorbed over 30,000 electronic stories by way of television. Stories which provide our cultural mythology - what it means to be alive today - how the world turns, - and what those stories tell is that the world turns fast and easily. Answers, resolutions of problems, and stardom come fast. Products make life easier. Even the most complex dilemmas will be resolved in a one hour show. We are giving the future generation massive doses of optimism - and no hope. we are not providing them with stories which will deepen the level at which they live life.

"The Little Engine that Could" is a famous American child's story - and it vividly shows the difference between optimism and hope. It is also one of the primary stories we have as a nation told to explain our individual, corporate and national success. The little engine wants to be like the larger engines and go over the mountain with its load of cars. As it strains up the mountain it puffs "I think I can, I think I can", and it does. That's optimism and we as a nation heard that story and bought it. It's the power of positive thinking school. So what happens when that engine, now middle-aged and a railroad executive, gets side-tracked/encouraged to leave/laid off? Did he fail to think he could? Did he engineer the recession? Was he not optimistic enough? And if our country or our steel or our cars are no longer the flagship of the world rails, is it because we didn't try harder? Luckly there are other stories.

The Bible gives us stories which give us hope. The Christian faith is sometimes unthinkingly called optimistic. A faith whose symbol is an ancient form of torture and whose watchword is "Take up your cross and follow me" and whose God becomes human to endure evil and pain with us cannot be called optimistic.

There is a pseudo-Christian heresy of optimism found which says - Find Jesus and things will get better and better. Unfortunately this heresy gets the most media time. The electronic commercialization and trivialization of the faith often replaces hard hope with easy optimism.

The Christian story has hope because it is a story. There is a beginning. There is drama and plot. And there will be an end. It doesn't necessarily mean that things will get better. It means that God is in control - past, present and future. The surety of knowing how things will end and the surety of knowing who created and began all things gives us an incredible reservoir of strength and assurance and encouragement. That is Christian hope. It's like playing basketball with a team that you know will win. Knowing that, you can loosen up, play better, be a better team member and enjoy the game. Hope, not optimism, is a hallmark of the Christian faith.

This hope prompts our actions and causes us to care about and share with one another. But it's more than caring about others. Our role as Christians has got to be seen as something more than a voluntary social welfare organization helping others or doing good. We are and we must be that, of course, but without the underpinnings of the Christian story then those actions of the church are no different than those of government agencies.

But isn't it the good that counts? Who cares why it's done? T. S. Elliot in the play "Murder in the Cathedral" has Sir Thomas Becket say that the "greatest treason is to do the right deed for the wrong reason." Governments change, policies and people change, what society views as proper changes. The strength of the Christian faith is that it has continued to inform, interpret and judge what society does. To do that it has needed a standard, a reference. How will we continue to respond to and in and with society if we have forgotten the very basic tenets which make us distinctive, the very stories that orient us - and give us hope?

"Whether we read the Bible or not, whether we believe it to be true and binding in all its parts or find it more or less irrelevant or incomprehensible we cannot escape its claim on us and still call ourselves Christians. To be a Christian is to belong to a community whose identity and vocation have been deeply and decisively shaped by the Bible." (Phyllis Bird, The Bible as the Churches Book)

We can't ignore the Bible or avoid it so we might as well join it and make its crazy quilt of stories ours. This whole library of books has a story. It's the story of a people who discovered, with a strange mixture of exaltation and terror, that they had been possessed by God - that God had taken them over and was using them for some tremendous purpose. They were never quite sure what the purpose was. So they waited for centuries for their promised Messiah who would make it all clear. In the meantime, they wrote and rewrote the stories of the great things God had all ready done for them.

And since it was God who was doing it, who was using the people for God's own purpose, there was little need to whitewash the stories. The major players are presented in all their humanness. The TV soaps like Dallas and Dynasty have plots which water down the scandels of David and Bathsheba or of Abraham and Sarah. Jacob the Cheat seems to almost systematically break all ten commandments and yet it is this character whom God chooses to carry on the faith. Hope is realizing the great things God has done and looking forward to the great things yet to come. And even when they had little else the Hebrews had hope.

Then a man was born; one of their number, a clown of a king who lived and died and strangely lived again in the experience of his friends. And his friends read again the ancient stories of God's dealings with their ancestors, but this time they interpreted what they read in light of what they had seen of God's purpose in Jesus - in his living and dying and living again. And then it began to make sense - not just for Jews like themselves, but for anyone who had eyes to see or ears to hear. With this encouragement they too began to write of the mighty acts of God that they had seen in Christ.

And once again because of the confidence that is rooted in hope, those writers would matter-of-factly record how they and others had doubted, stumbled, fumbled, and generally been ordinary human beings, becauee God had been able to use them as much as in spite of themselves as not. So the disciples Andrew and James could fight over who was going to get a cabinet position, and Peter could deny ever knowing Jesus. And Paul, for whom scripture was what we would call the Old Testament, would laugh to think that his impassioned scribblings would someday be venerated as scripture.

And that gives us a clue that God is continuing to tell stories. For the Great Story Teller will be as dynamic and alive as the stories. To ignore by criticism or irrevelancy the Biblical story is to make of society, or America, an idol. To make the Bible a cookbook guide to finance, marital relations, astronomy or macrobiology is to make of it an idol. And as the story of God on Mt. Sinai says, God will have no idols as competition.

The telling and retelling of these stories for centuries has brought life and hope to millions. And this hope comes and is felt because that story becomes their story and yours and mine.

How does it happen that that long ago and far away story becomes here and now? There you are reading the thing (and you've got to read it - sensibly, objectively, critically even) when suddenly it grabs you and the story jumps out of the book and into your life. For me, it's like those pictures that children and psychologist love where one minute you're looking at a goblet and the next without warning, it becomes two faces. The next moment it's a goblet. As you read the bible, the Bible reads you. John Calvin called this reading the Bible with "the spectacles of faith." The Presbyterian Confession of 1967 calls it the "illumination of the Holy Spirit." All trying to describe the continuing mystery of God's presence in these living words.

So Paul writes to a church 1925 years ago, and it is our church. And his words to them are words to us if we would lay claim to be Christian in this new year, with a new building - with new programs.

And these are the marks of that church: "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves." With greater strength comes greater responsibility. "For whatever was written in former days was written for instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope."

"May the God of these scriptures, the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant to you to live in such harmony with one another in accord with Christ Jesus." The harmony of the rich interplay of different voices singing different melodies, doing different works, finding different emphasis is what makes this church and this life to stimulating. "That together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

That is our story. That is our hope. Amen.